

Beyond Traditional Curation of Collections

The Midwest Field Office of the National Park Service encompasses 13 states from the Canadian border, southward to Arkansas, eastward to Ohio, and westward to the Dakotas, Nebraska and Kansas. Site specific museum collections contain material culture from Civil War battlefields, archaic earthworks, sunken ships, and the legacy of former presidents.

Traditionally, historians and park interpreters have combined artifacts and reproductions for both static exhibits and consumptive use contexts. To date, many of our history-based public educational programs have been confined to furnished historic houses, visitor center exhibits, reenactments, and living history farms. Our preservation concerns are rooted in our professional museum training and

have limited our willingness to promote access to collections.

Is there a way we can truly use our collection, yet meet the obligations of the National Park Service mission to preserve, protect, and enjoy our natural and cultural resources? The public is eager to experience their national heritage and find answers to the questions: who was here before, how did they live, raise their families, and build their communities? We must involve the public in our preservation efforts to protect and preserve Park Service collections, while encouraging their use. The time has finally come to share our preservation dilemmas, to broaden our focus, and move beyond traditional curation.

There are ways to preserve and protect, yet conscientiously use collections. Some ideas include developing internship opportunities for students in historic preservation, museum studies, and cultural resources management; creating outreach programs that focus on resolving preservation dilemmas; producing audio visual programs featuring objects from collections; reproducing historic photographs for postcard books and posters; encouraging research and publication of site-specific collections; developing traveling exhibits; loaning artifacts for temporary exhibits; interfacing with private sector museums and historical societies; and finally, promoting accessibility.

National Park Service sites and their associated collections are the physical expressions of individuals whose stories unfold in their habitation sites and material culture. As stewards of these collections, we must look beyond traditional curation philosophy and seek new ways to share our national heritage.

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National Park Service postcard courtesy Ozark National Scenic Riverways, Van Buren, Missouri.

